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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 000388

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: OPRC KMDR KPAO TW
SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: CROSS-STRAIT CHARTER FLIGHTS

Summary: The historic first direct charter flight across the Taiwan Strait last Saturday received considerable coverage in local Taiwan newspapers, with almost all of the Taipei dailies covering the news on their front pages. The sentiments expressed on editorial pages, however, fell into two categories: positive-but-cautious, and clearly negative.

The editorials of the pro-status quo "China Times" and the pro-unification "United Daily News," as well as the pro-unification English-language "China Post," all welcomed the historic move and said they hope that this positive development will bode well for further thawing of cross-Strait relations. They all also cautioned, however, that Beijing's 'anti-secession law' and Taiwan's constitutional re-engineering are two variables that might affect future cross-Strait interaction. The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" took a relatively neutral stance, but cautioned that it "depends on China's leaders" to decide whether "a window of opportunity" for the improvement of cross-strait relations will be opened soon.

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" was the only major daily that did not cover the direct cross-Strait charter flights on its front page. In its editorial, this newspaper called the development a move to help China push for unification with -- and finally annexation of -- Taiwan. End summary.

A) "From the Successful Cross-Strait Charter Flights for the Lunar New Year, Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait [Should] Search for a Platform for Cross-Strait Reconciliation and Dialogue"

The centrist, pro-status quo "China Times" editorialized (1/30):

".[T]he first historic non-stop flights across the Taiwan Strait, which had not been conducted for more than half a century, have finally come true. The geographical distance between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait seemed to be temporarily shortened during the Lunar New Year holidays. Even though the cross-Strait charter flights do not indicate that direct transportation of passenger and cargo flights are expected to take place any time soon, or that cross-Strait relations have thawed, this is at least a positive development. As long as the first step has been made, chances may be that there will be a second step. This newspaper would like to salute those on both sides of the Taiwan Strait who contributed to making these charter flights possible. We also hope that all the parties involved can broaden their visions in the future, using the success of the charter flights [as a basis] and we hope that both sides of the Taiwan Strait can move ahead to realize and witness the future prospects of dialogue, reconciliation and peace across the Taiwan Strait."

B) "Charter Flights Have Warmed up the [Iced] Cross-Strait Ties"

Journalist Wang Ming-yi commented in the "My Views" column of the centrist, pro-status quo "China Times" (1/30):

". The U.S. factor may have been an invisible force that pushed for the cross-Strait charter flights [to happen] for the Chinese New Year. But in the meantime, the huge business benefits for the airline companies across the Taiwan Strait also acted as an incentive and as behind-the-scene pressure for changes to the charter flight policy. The fact that both Beijing and Taipei each seek an easing and stable interactive atmosphere for cross-Strait relations was also a major concern that drove [Chinese President] Hu Jintao and [Taiwan President] Chen Shui-bian to happily push for charter flights for the Chinese New Year. .

"The charter flights for Chinese New Year 2005 have not only demonstrated the dissolving power of capitalism on the blocked transportation policy but also reflected the 'thawing effect' of economic vitality on rigid politics. All the more, the model of two-way flights for cross-Straits Lunar New Year charter flights indicated that both sides could be pragmatically released from the endless entanglement of political issues. The cross-Straits charter flights have evidently provided various turning points of possibility for future cross-Straits interaction."

C) "Take Advantage of Direct Cross-Straits Charter Flights and Restart the Negotiations toward 'Three Links'"

Journalist Wang Chou-chung wrote in the centrist, pro-status quo "China Times" (1/30):

". Although both sides of the Strait claim that cross-Straits charter flights are merely a 'business activity,' both sides cannot deny that this historic, economics-based activity that has served the interests of some Taiwanese businessmen based in China will help to lessen the political deadlock of the 'three links' across the Taiwan Strait. Such a development will also mark an important step for both sides to carry out the 'three links' and to improve bilateral relations.

"But what lies ahead is that the PRC will pass its 'anti-secession law' at meeting of the tenth National People's Assembly in March 2005, which will likely trigger a severe reaction from Taiwan. Taiwan, likewise, is about to elect members to the National Assembly to amend its constitution by May 2005, and the constitutional reengineering will get started by the end of 2005. The 'legal warfare' across the Taiwan Strait is at the brink of war. Although both sides of the Strait claim that [those moves] are for internal needs and do not involve unification or independence, there will be no improvement in cross-Straits relations if both sides of the Strait cannot make use of the climate of détente accompanying the direct cross-Straits charter flights to increase mutual trust or to create opportunities for resuming cross-Straits talks."

D) "Flowers Bloom during the Warmth of Springtime? Two Big Variables Will Still Affect Cross-Straits Relations - Beijing's 'Anti-Secession Law' and Taiwan's Constitutional Re-engineering; It All Depends on Whether the Leaders on Both Sides of the Strait Can Demonstrate Self-Restraint and Flexibility"

Journalists Lo Chia-wei and Wu Chung-tao observed in the conservative, pro-unification "United Daily News" (1/30):

". But for cross-Straits relations, will the flowers bloom during the warmth of springtime? What lies ahead are two big variables - the legislation of China's 'Anti-secession Law' and Taiwan's constitutional re-engineering. The carnival-like atmosphere for the first charter flight across the Taiwan Strait will soon subside after the Chinese New Year. What follows will be China's People's Congress reviewing the 'Anti-secession law' in March. .

"Taiwan's plan to start constitutional re-engineering in 2005 and to implement the new constitution in 2008 is also a major indicator for the future development of cross-Straits relations. . People of both sides of the Taiwan Strait all look forward to convenient and rapid [transportation] exchanges and living and prospering peacefully together. Whether such hopes can be achieved depends on whether the leaders on both sides can demonstrate the self-restraint to 'put aside their disputes' and the flexibility to 'negotiate pragmatically.' "

E) "Open the Window Opportunity"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" noted in an editorial (1/29):

"Today is a day of great significance for cross-strait relations. Taiwan's first charter flight for the Lunar New Year heads for China, the first non-stop flight after more than fifty years of political stalemate across the Strait. Although this policy is beneficial only to Taiwanese businessmen in China, the decision made by the government is still of great symbolic significance at this juncture when the cross-strait relationship is still strained. .

"Rather than loudly promoting Jiang's Eight Points, China should promote the spirit that led to the Lunar

New Year charter flights across the Strait. To get that deal, both sides displayed flexibility and creativity by first establishing mutual credibility and consensus on economic and practical issues. .

"Giving up fixed opinions, building mutual trust and creating beneficial conditions are all necessary to improve the cross-strait relationship. Will a window of opportunity for such improvement be opened soon? That will depend on China's leaders."

F) "Jiang's Reunification Plan Falls on Deaf Ears"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" said in an editorial (1/29):

".[T]he realization of direct, two-way flights between Taiwan and the mainland during the Lunar New Year holidays is something that deserves effort to promote. It is a historic first step toward the establishment of 'san-tong,' or three direct links in cross-strait transport, trade and postal services. .

"People in Taiwan are less interested in the 'one country, two systems' than in practical things that affect their personal well-being. San-tong, for instance, is one of them. To give credit where it is due, Beijing has demonstrated some flexibility in making the direct flight possible by putting aside, for a moment, sensitive political issues. As a much larger and stronger country, mainland China should display greater tolerance in dealing with a much smaller sibling."

G) "'Direct Transportation Fever' Is Like Helping China to Use Economic [Means] to Push for Unification and Annex Taiwan"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" editorialized (1/31):

"Given all these moves [that China took], including the cross-Straits charter flights, what exactly does China want from Taiwan? Evidently, China wants to annex Taiwan. It's Beijing's double-handed policy to aim its missiles at Taiwan and to use economics to draw in Taiwan. If Taiwan also 'puts aside the sovereignty disputes' and facilitates Taiwan's investments or capital flow into China, Beijing will be able to implement its plan to 'use [the Taiwan] people to force [Taiwan] officials and to use economic [means] to push for unification [with Taiwan]' in an unhurried and leisurely manner. If Taiwan wants to stand in an invincible position, the top priority for Taiwan is to maintain its national sovereignty. Only when China acknowledges Taiwan's national sovereignty can Taiwan have further trade exchanges with China. Otherwise, Taiwan's businessmen or Taiwan investments [based in China] will become bargaining chips for China to use to turn against Taiwan. In short, if Taiwan fails to stick to its national sovereignty and starts to have direct transportation or three links with China rashly, the island will be annexed by China sooner or later."

H) "Interests of Taiwan Businessmen [Based in China] Do Not Equal Taiwan's Interests"

Journalist Wang Ping-yu said in the pro-independence "Liberty Times" (1/30):

".Due to the massive publicity by public and private sectors [in Taiwan], the cross-Straits charter flights for the Lunar New Year have confused people, making them believe that convenience for Taiwan businessmen [in China] is well-being for all Taiwan people, and that the interests of Taiwan businessmen [in China] are the interests of all Taiwan people.

"Is this the reality of cross-Straits charter flights? What about [Taiwan's] national security and the issue that Taiwan-Hong Kong air routes have become China's domestic routes? Maybe the private sector cannot clarify these questions, but how can our government intoxicate itself blindly and even easily give up the bottom line that it used to stick to for such a long time just to create a false image of ameliorated cross-Straits relations?"